

2017-11-09

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/11852>

Routledge

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Towards a pedagogy of hope: Sustainability Education in the early years

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1. Introduction

Education for Sustainability (EfS) is increasingly being recognised as an essential dimension of quality education in the 21st Century. However, it is common for EfS to be framed around a narrative of multiple points of global crisis. This stems from an awareness that our children today are growing up in the midst of manifold threats to wellbeing, in both human and environmental terms, as articulated by the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Whilst recognising this problem-based and challenge-led imperative for EfS, our chapter argues for the importance of an alternative starting point in the early years. EfS, we propose, needs to be appropriately scaled to the lifeworlds of our children and to be agency-based and appreciation-led. The early years practitioner has a vital and exciting role to play in helping to nurture in young citizens ways of being that enable them to participate in the creation of more sustainable futures in their everyday lives. This needs to be contextualised in a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of the natural world of which they are a part. This chapter will therefore present an approach to EfS that seeks to highlight the importance of providing a pedagogy of hope; with compassion and creativity at its heart. In so doing we draw from a case study of a pioneering primary school that is seeking to embody such an approach and that is highlighting the leading role early years practitioners can play in this vital area of educational reform.

2. The end is nigh – common narratives of crisis driving EfS

The Education for Sustainability (EfS) movement has stemmed from an increasing understanding of multiple and global points of crisis that threaten the ability of humans, other species and ecosystems to flourish and thrive (Hart 1997, Sterling 2001, Hicks 2014). More so; these narratives of crisis place cause and blame at the feet of humankind and our modern ways of living. Articulated by seminal texts such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the 1960s, what has proceeded since have been countless scientific reports and commentaries observing a situation of peril and plight that current dominant patterns of societal development are framed as driving us towards.

Consequently, children today are growing up in the midst of a sense of crisis, exposed to an array of mind-boggling sustainability challenges with spatial dimensions of global complexity and temporal dimensions of far-reaching future generational consequence. The roots of these anxiety inducing challenges are systemic and enmeshed within the adult worlds of cultural, economic, technological and political spheres that our children are still in the early stages of inheriting. Such global issues

of crisis include today climate change, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, pollution and waste, fresh water scarcity, extreme poverty, inequality, food and nutrition insecurity and disease and health risks.

These and other interlinked sustainability challenges highlight that we are living in times of unprecedented global challenge that together present a web of threat to our quality of life. As a result, calls for sustainable change at a societal level remain prevalent. Most recently this has led to the United Nations articulating a series of Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015). Covering both environmental stewardship and social justice agendas of radical reform, these 17 goals, to be achieved by 2030, are to:

- Goal 1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2 End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3 Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6 Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7 Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8 Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9 Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10 Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12 Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- Goal 14 Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- Goal 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- Goal 17 Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Crucially this agenda for transforming our world raises not simply the need for education for all, but asks much deeper questions around what *kind* of education is necessary?

3. In search of a hopeful starting point in the early years

The recent global interest in EfS can therefore be traced back to a growing awareness of multiple threats to present and future wellbeing. These systemic points of crisis lie across the environmental, social, economic and political spheres and bring into question the role, function and form of an education system that is fit for transforming such a reality, rather than replicating it.

Whilst we can see the merit of a global set of sustainable development goals being utilised as focal points within a problem-based, challenge-led approach to EfS, we would argue that in the early years setting a more apt starting point needs to be constructed. The sheer enormity, complexity and seriousness of these global narratives of peril can induce an array of emotional responses including anxiety, despair, denial and fear (Hicks 2014). Whilst it is impossible and arguably not beneficial for early years practitioners to try and protect their children from this burden, this deficit and crisis narrative does not represent in our view the appropriate starting point for EfS.

Instead, we would argue that the vital role of early years practitioners is to playfully engage children with a sense of appreciation and value of the natural and social world nurturing a sense of compassionate connection, convivial relationship and civic capacity. The early years setting needs to be a nurturing ground for children to develop their sense of wonder and innate curiosity about their lifeworlds. It is also where they can actively experiment with their sense of collaborative agency and capacity to steward and serve the wellbeing of themselves, each other and the landscapes they inhabit. This frames EfS in the early years as seeking to innovate towards pedagogies of hope.

This position is very much in alignment with recent EfS research at an international level recognizing the effectiveness of learner centered, active, participatory and experiential pedagogies (UNESCO 2012). These applied learning approaches in EfS actually build upon many pre-existing pedagogical traditions within the early years context. For example, in the UK they mirror the characteristics of effective learning, as stated within Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage i.e. creating and thinking critically, playing and exploring and active learning (Early Education 2012). Similarly, in New Zealand the Te Whāriki curriculum policy emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning in the early years and the importance of space for collaboration, exploration and reflection (Ministry of Education 1996). This all supports early years practitioners employing a variety of creative activities in EfS such as storytelling, simulations, role-play, and place-based learning. EfS can be seen to be advocating child-centred approaches in order for learning to be provided in ways that are personally accessible, locally relevant and culturally appropriate. It promotes concepts of learning beyond the

classroom with flexible and natural spaces for learning coming to the fore, such as is advocated by Forest Schools (Constable 2015). Similarly it encourages young learners to engage with values that underpin notions of social justice, such as is advocated by UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools Award (UNICEF 2015). This pedagogical approach also recognises the importance of early years education being centred on nurturing children's collaborative creativity. With the very real possibility that many of our early years children could live to see the turn of the next century, it is impossible for us as educators to foresee entirely how global challenges are going to play out in their lifetimes and the solutions they need to be educated about (Scott and Gough 2004). Instead their ability to flourish as future citizens requires in the first instance a sense of appreciation and connection to the places where they live and a playful curiosity to explore together how they can start to create their own lives and landscapes.

Through this appreciation-based active learning process, early years children develop and exercise the values, skills, knowledge and convivial relationships that EfS ultimately seeks to nurture. This frames children as active social agents with the rights and capacities to participate in decision making about matters affecting them, as endorsed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). Engaging children in the process of conceptualising, planning, acting and reflecting helps them to develop the collective will, courage and wisdom necessary for the pursuit of more sustainable futures.

4. Reframing the Sustainable Development Goals for the Early Years

The direction of travel of EfS adopting an agency-based and appreciation led starting point in the early years encourages a framing of EfS as essentially being centred on an active concern for wellbeing. EfS encourages this relational care being extended across three dimensions:

The biosphere dimension: Appreciative care for people and planet

The spatial dimension: Appreciative care for the local and global

The temporal dimension: Appreciative care for the present and future

Applying this relational and compassionate value-based lens to the Sustainable Development Goals framework enables this translation for the early years setting:

The Love Living Goals

Goal 1 We're taking care of each other's needs

Goal 2 We're checking we have all got enough to eat today

Goal 3 We're looking after our head, heart and hands

Goal 4 We all love learning here

Goal 5 We're treating boys and girls as equally precious

Goal 6 We treasure water that keeps us well and clean

Goal 7 We use wind and sun energy for having fun

Goal 8 We're making a safe space to learn and grow

- Goal 9 We're creatively imagining new and kinder futures
- Goal 10 We're playing fair
- Goal 11 We're guardians of where we live
- Goal 12 We refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle and rot
- Goal 13 We're sky minders
- Goal 14 We're sea carers
- Goal 15 We're land keepers
- Goal 16 We're peacemakers
- Goal 17 We're making friends around the world

5. Putting this approach into practice – The story of Silverhill

Within nurseries and primary schools, implementing an educational approach that embodies these love living goals requires an integrated systemic leadership approach. It requires that school leaders, staff, pupils and parents all play a part in carefully considering how EfS can be infused across the curriculum, campus, community and culture of the school. Outlined below is an example of one school's efforts to put this into place.

Comment [VH1]: Note for VH/DE – include a specific link to JG's chapter on sustainable leadership.

Silverhill Primary School is an example of a leading sustainable school within the UK. The love living goals outlined above are very much embodied in the ethos and culture of the school today. The school's EfS work began by using the DCSF Sustainable Schools Framework (DCSF 2008). This framework proved valuable in supporting the school's overarching wellbeing agenda and its conceptualisation of education helping children to learn:

- Care for oneself,
- Care for each other (across cultures, distances and generations)
- Care for the environment (both near and far)
- (DCSF 2008:4)

As a result of its pioneering work in this area, in 2013 Silverhill Primary School became one of the first schools in England to be awarded Eco-Schools Ambassador status by Keep Britain Tidy (www.eco-schools.org).

Here is an account of the school told from the perspective of its Headteacher, Kate Nash.

As the Headteacher of Silverhill Primary School I have over the past decade endeavoured to harness my passion for sustainability and have driven the transformation of the school campus, creating a variety of EfS learning spaces in our school grounds. Moore(1997:32) writes "Natural spaces and materials stimulate children's limitless imaginations and serve as the medium of inventiveness and creativity observable in almost any group of children playing in a natural setting". My vision has been to create a landscape of opportunity that enables children to develop their communication and play in purposeful and diverse learning spaces. The curriculum has been designed to integrate themes

that enable children to learn through their experiences and utilise the campus to ignite imagination and make connections with the natural world that inspire an appreciation of what we have and a hope for the future.

The values-based approach to EFS by the school is captured by the 'Spirit of Silverhill' wooden tower displayed in the school entrance. This tower is made of blocks each illustrating a core value. Integrity, loyalty, passion, honesty, pride, strength, perseverance, initiative, respect, independence, tolerance are some of the tenets that bind our community together and make it strong. If we do not adhere to these values some of the building blocks are lost, the tower, and therefore the strength and spirit of our community, crumbles. Our vision is to teach our children to embrace and internalise these values and become resilient and responsible sustainable and global citizens.

We have sought to nurture an appreciation, sense of wonder and connection with the natural world both near and far through a variety of approaches. Previous twinning projects with schools in Africa and India have brought a wealth of understanding and knowledge about different cultures, landscapes and our own lives and ensured some amazing first hand experiences for the children and staff. As part of our Polar Region theme, links with the Polar Foundation have enabled Skype sessions with a scientific research station in Antarctica. The children were fascinated as they were taken on a guided tour of the Princess Elizabeth Station and gained a huge insight from speaking with the Norwegian scientist. A major highlight was seeing flags the children had designed for Antarctica Day flying outside this impressive building surrounded by crystal white snow and turquoise blue skies. These activities certainly heightened the awareness of all children of the beauty as well as fragility of the Polar Regions and our children are passionate about doing all they can to protect these amazing habitats.

The school environment, and particularly our Early Years, demonstrate much of Elizabeth Jarman's doctrine of Communication Friendly Spaces using natural colours and materials (Jarman, 2013). These purposeful spaces and calming, natural décor are set up to allow the children to explore new experiences without being distracted from the immediate environment. The reading and writing dens are cosy places filled with high quality resources that promote communication and story-telling. The mud kitchen is a carefully considered environment which promotes independence, organisation and working together whilst having great fun in the mud!

I fully subscribe to Sir Ken Robinson's principle that it is hard to have new ideas if you grow up in an education culture that is fixated with standardisation (Robinson 1999). Rather than adopting pre-designed schemes of work, our curriculum is bespoke and fluid in its construction. It has flexibility and space and is very much tailored to the interests of our pupils focussing on the key

skills they need to develop to enable them to flourish. We have created a learning environment where children feel emotionally and physically safe in a stimulating, inclusive and supportive environment.

An important element of our EfS curriculum involves giving the children the opportunity to really take time to awaken their senses through their surroundings. Spending time in the den listening to stories or watching birds, walking through the woodland, sitting in the wildflower meadow, dipping in the pond, collecting the chicken eggs, picking fruit in the Forest Garden, wandering through the willow dome, cooking marshmallows or singing round the fire pit, digging up the vegetables or planting flowers for the bees. All this allows the children space to think and reflect and develop a strong sense of connection and well-being. Each year the children become stewards of a tree, learning about the different features, observe the changes and decorate it as the seasons dictate. These carefully constructed, diverse areas throughout the campus ensure children have a personal space within and beyond the classroom walls.

Aspiration and the pursuit of excellence is a key component of our EfS vision and our young children learn from the outset the value of listening to the critiques of their peers in order to improve upon what they are trying to achieve (Berger 2003). The assessment process of 'peer critique' follows the format of being kind, specific and helpful and has shaped pupils who are proud of what they do and proud of how they respect both themselves and others.

Fisher (2016) stresses the importance of quality interaction that is not totally led by the practitioner, but by the child, something which more accurately indicates the child's level of understanding and then allows the adult to guide the child in their 'next steps' on their learning journey. The children have autonomy over many of their activities and discover much through their self directed play. Whether in the mud kitchen, the wood or around the fire pit the EfS practitioner needs to think closely about the words, prompts and questions used in order to enable each child to develop their language and thinking rather than their learning being 'hijacked' by the adult.

Talking and Thinking Floor Books (Warden 2012) provide a channel for creating a closer match between the child and the EfS curriculum they are experiencing. The books are often used to support topic work, posing questions such as 'Does everything grow? Would a dinosaur make a good pet?' The children get the opportunity to share their ideas in relation to the questions posed as well as identifying what they would like to learn more about. This in turn helps to guide their own learning. They provide the opportunity for building self-esteem and positive attitudes as the learner is involved in the decision making process. The process of being involved in their own learning increases inherent motivation that stays with the child throughout their life. Books can be created around any sustainability topic such as Autumn - The

Leaf Man. We believe that children have the right to be respected as individuals and we can afford them respect by valuing their thoughts, opinions and demonstrate to them that their ideas are important. Making these books available and treating them with respect are fundamental to the learning process.

The involvement of community is central to the ethos of our school. Parents and grandparents are encouraged to interact on a daily basis with the school's EfS work through, for example, helping to maintain our outside learning spaces or supporting the children in their learning adventures. The school's annual Food Fayre is always a popular event with community members. Harvest lanterns carved from pumpkins and a variety of apple and pumpkin based dishes help ensure everyone has the opportunity to learn about food and farming through creative, play-based activities whilst socialising, interacting and eating a range of homemade, delicious dishes!

Pupil voice is fundamental to the Spirit of Silverhill. Our youngest pupils are involved in shaping ideas through class discussion which ensures they are involved in the EfS decision making processes and know their views are treated with respect. Pupils are rewarded for demonstrating the Spirit of our school and supporting our Environmental Promises and Eco Code.

A fundamental component of the integration of EfS into the curriculum is the involvement and engagement of all staff. Teachers lead on specific EfS themes such as global dimension, food and farming or energy and water. The teachers have a team to assist them in organising different activities such as the energy based 'Green Day'. A Community of Practice was established nine years ago; this has provided a forum whereby teachers gain inspiration and encouragement from each other. Throughout the year, time is allocated for the teams to come together to plan cross-curricular themed activities. This approach has enabled us to develop a cohesive strategy that has embedded EfS into the curriculum. An example would be the whole school project based on 'The Tin Forest' (Ward 2001) which enabled us to explore the topic of 'waste' for a week, in a cross curricular and innovative way.

"Come forth into the light of things, let nature be your teacher" wrote William Wordsworth in 1888 and in today's interactive virtual world I believe it is the time to re-engage children with the natural world so that they do not become victims of 'nature- deficit disorder' (Louv 2005) but are enthused, empowered and stimulated to learn through the enjoyment of their surroundings.

The aspirational vision and ethos of our school very much mirrors the Love Living Goals outlined above and is encapsulated in our school prayer which is recited on a daily basis;

Imagine a world where all people are at peace and have food and shelter.
Where every child is loved and educated to develop their talents.

Where love is more important than money.
In this world everyone is treated equally and fairly.
Imagine a world where we care for our environment and all that lives in it
is treated with respect and kindness.
Life is filled with happiness and laughter.
May I play my part in sharing love, understanding, wisdom and courage
to help the world live in harmony.

6. Conclusion

The stance we have taken here is that the early years practitioner has the important task of translating EfS goals into the lifeworlds of their children; playing with learning spaces that are congruent with the values of care and compassion and that embrace a sense of curiosity and appreciation of where the children live. This we argue involves resisting the tendency in EfS to frame everything around pre-existing narratives of crisis and deficit.

Returning to the work and words of Rachel Carson, she herself pointed towards a way that we feel apt for the early years – highlighting the importance of immersion and reflection on the beauty of Planet Earth:

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.” (Carson 1965:100)

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we have for destruction.” (Carson quoted in Lear 1999:94)

As our children grow up surrounded by narratives of trouble on their streets and screens, we would argue that in these formative years it is vital that they are given the space to be immersed in the natural beauty of this world and engaged in creating their own narratives of hope. The early years of school need to begin the adventure of children collaborating within their communities to make a positive difference – to realise the power of compassion in action. For this to take root, the Early Years practitioner needs to embody this relational and appreciative approach in their daily practice.

Adopting such a hopeful and appreciative stance will provide the very foundations upon which intellectual curiosity, resilient relationships and emotional agility can flourish in all its diverse forms. A growing body of work is helping to highlight the importance of EfS representing a pedagogy of hope and the leading role early years practitioners can play in this approach (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2010). Taking up this

challenge in many national educational policy contexts means much needs to be rethought and redesigned in early years education (Elliott et al 2017). It therefore represents an approach that requires early years practitioners receive specialised training and support, drawing from the insights of international research in the field (Davis and Elliott 2014) as well as from organisations set up to practically support educators across all sectors, such as the charity SEEd in the UK (www.se-ed.co.uk/edu/).

But we would also wish to argue that early years practitioners already have much to offer the field of EfS, due to their familiarity with and expertise in the creative, experiential and learner-centred pedagogies that much of the EfS research points towards as good practice for engaging learners of all ages. As demonstrated by the story of Silverhill Primary School, early years practitioners have a vital contribution to make in EfS being put into practice in relationally informed ways that are apt and life affirming, placing wellbeing at the heart of how a school is structured and lead. This is where children learn through a playful exploration of their lifeworld and act as active citizens; constructing in the classroom, school grounds and neighborhood their own preferable futures.

Questions

1. If you were to apply the love living goals (as set out in section 4 of this chapter) to your educational setting/ practice, what would this affirm that you currently do or what initial changes do you think this would prompt?
2. Could collaborative leadership of EfS be developed in your setting through a Community of Practice?
3. This chapter has suggested there is value in an approach to EfS that combines an appreciation of the world with a sense of agency regardless of age – what might be alternative perspectives to this position?

Further Reading

Davis, J. and Elliott, S. (2014) *Research in Early Childhood Education for Sustainability*. London: Routledge.

A provocative and challenging read with chapters from a range of international researchers that offer new dimensions for more deeply informed practices in EfS.

Jarman, E. (2013) *The Communication Friendly Spaces Approach*. Kent: Elizabeth Jarman Publishing

This focuses on the role of the environment in supporting communication skills, emotional well-being, physical development and general engagement. The book offers advice as to how to develop truly effective learning environments where the child is at the centre of the learning.

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